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Locks expansion discussed at Lake Superior meeting

By MARISA KWIATKOWSKI
The Grand Haven Tribune

Citizens voiced concerns about the future of the Great Lakes at the International Lake Superior Board of Control meeting Monday at Grand Haven High School.

Grand Haven was the only Michigan location for the multi-site public teleconference; Other meetings took place simultaneously in Duluth, Minn., and Thunder Bay and Parry Sound, Ontario, Canada.

The International Lake Superior Board of Control is part of the government-appointed International Joint Commission with staff from the United States and Canada. The Board of Control sets Lake Superior outflows and oversees the operation of the control works -- monitoring repairs and maintenance, directing flow measurements and conducting studies to develop and improve the regulation plan.

The board chiefly discussed its current studies on the future of the Great Lakes navigational system during the meeting.

The current system was created under guidelines for boat size set in the early 1900s. The Soo Locks in Sault Ste. Marie contain four locks, only two of which are operational. Seventy percent of the present-day vessels traveling Lake Superior go through the Poe Lock, the largest of the four. Many boats are too large to use the other working lock, the MacArthur.

"We are looking into improvements," said regulation representative Lt. Col. Thomas Magness, who officiated the two-hour Grand Haven meeting. "We could either do nothing, close the system or deepen the canal to 35 feet. The next step is seeing how much it could cost and what the environmental consequences would be."

Growing concerns over invasive species have put a damper on the expansion of the system, although nothing

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is being ruled out yet.

"I think there is a win-win situation out there that no one has thought of yet," Magness said.

Magness said he thinks the solution is somewhere between closing the system and deepening it to 35 feet.

"Engineering-wise, we could do anything we wanted," said Carl Woodruff, a hydraulic engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit. "Politics, the environment and economics. There lies the big question."

"And," Magness added, "we're going nowhere without (Canada)."

The navigation system study -- conducted by economic, environmental and engineering teams -- should have compiled its data in about another year and a half.

The board also fielded questions from the public about other local water concerns.

Holland resident Greg Holcombe asked the board about the use of energy and resources by the Ice Mountain bottled water company, which bases its operations in Mecosta County, highlighting a local concern of water diversion.

The water company, whose parent company is Nestle Waters North America, was under scrutiny recently by environmentalists who said the company has depleted local lakes, streams and wetlands.

"You always hear that the next civil war is going to be fought over water," Magness said. "When I came to Michigan, I saw a billboard with a straw stuck in the water of the Great Lakes that said 'back off, sucker...' It's going to be a major issue in the time to come."

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